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Group unveils requests for planetarium money

MOONSCAPE SET, NASA LINK

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TOMS RIVER BUREAU

A NASA Internet link. A life-sized mannequin dressed in an astronaut suit. A moonscape set where visitors can get their photos taken. Carpeting for the lobby. These are among the demands that a group that raised funds to help restore the Robert J. Novins Planetarium at Ocean County College wants before it releases \$42,000.

"Save the Planetarium," led by Richard Gamba, made the stipulations in a letter dated Friday to Michael B. York, the group's attorney. Gamba is a local T-shirt designer and space buff who belongs to a larger organization called the Astronomical Society of the Toms River Area.

Much to the frustration of OCC, Gamba has not released his group's money to the college foundation's general capital fund even though the college is just weeks away from starting renovations on the planetarium. The fundraising effort began after Edward J. Devine — the charismatic do-gooder who pledged \$2.5 million from his make-believe trucking empire to save the structure — was exposed as a fraud. He is now serving a five-year prison sentence for part of that deception.

"While we could easily have presented the Ocean County College Foundation with a check to be used toward the general funding of the renovation project, it seemed to us that that would have failed the spirit of the community's gift," Gamba wrote. "We were hoping we could provide the public with something they could 'see, feel and make use of' and know that their contributions provided this specific piece of the planetarium renovation. We felt this would be a more appropriate use of the public's donations, rather than having the public 'just know' that their contribution was somewhere in the building renovation."

Gamba made the letter public Tuesday, and said York had forwarded a copy to the Ocean County College Foundation, which has raised \$1.5 million to purchase a state-of-the-art new star projector and equipment for the astro theater without Save the Planetarium's help.

The planetarium is expected to reopen next spring, after completion of a \$3.5 million project to refurbish the 34-year-old landmark, which has been closed since 2006.

Tara B. Kelly, OCC vice president of college advancement, confirmed that the college had received a copy of the letter, but she said the college administration would not discuss the letter publicly until the Board of Trustees had a chance to review the matter.

The letter came this week, just as the 1970s-era projector was being disassembled in preparation for a move to the Planetarium Projector Museum in Big Bear Lake, Calif.

"With chewing gum and bailing wire, (we) kept it functioning," said James J. McGinty, OCC executive vice president. "As soon as the projector goes out, they are going to do some of the tear-down of the walls."

"(The new projector is) going to be state-of-the-art, once we're open and on, it's going to be up there with any other planetarium of the country," McGinty said.

Since it opened in 1974, the planetarium has used — by today's standards — antiquated slide projectors positioned on the oversized edge of a kind of catwalk that encircles the perimeter of the auditorium.

The slide projectors could create the illusion of a horizon and highlight constellations the projector displayed on the ceiling of the planetarium's dome, employing technology that was cutting-edge when Richard M. Nixon was in the White House.

The new projector is far more sophisticated and will be more like a virtual-reality simulation than the basic light show of the past, McGinty explained.

Audience members will be hurled into virtual space or get the feeling of being shrunk to the size of an atom to explore a cell, McGinty said.

College administration officials have made it clear that they are not relying on Save the Planetarium's donation, after Gamba broke off contact with the college in March, about the same time the college foundation concluded its official "Reach for the Stars" fundraising campaign.
